DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 251 602 CE 039 771

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TITLE The Exceptional Poet.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Gerontological Society (Anaheim, CA, March 17-21, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aging (Individuals); Educational Benefits; *Nursing Homes; *Older Adults; *Poetry; *Therapy; *Writing (Composition)

ABSTRACT

As part of the adult education program of Mountain View-Los Altos (California) High School District, elderly patients at skilled nursing care facilities take classes in poetry. The poetry classes are therapeutic in nature, satisfying a real need for these very ill elderly people to express their frustrations, hopes, fears, and joys. All of the class members are in various stages of handicap and sickness, and their ages range from 65 to 90. Two methods are used to stimulate poetry writing. In the first method, poetry selections on a particular subject chosen by the class are read by the teacher. The group then shares and contributes their own thoughts and feelings to the creation of a group poem. The teacher writes down each line as it is given, and the teacher or able class member then reads the assembled group poem. The second method is similar, in that the class picks and discusses a poetry subject and the teacher reads poetry selections applicable to the subject. Then, however, the teacher calls for class members to toss out words and phrases about the subject as fast as possible, rhyming whenever they can. The teacher records and reads back the results. Through these creative processes these students are overcoming their loss of ability to do for themselves or to do something for others and showing just how exceptional they really are. (KC)

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THE EXCEPTIONAL POET

Aged residents of skilled nursing facilities are exceptional on at least two technical levels. They are members of an expanding minority in our society of persons sixty-five and over, and part of still another minority because of their need for institutional care. Only about five percent of this elderly population actually reside in nursing homes.

It has been my experience as a teacher of poetry and communication skills in skilled nursing facilities that there is still another level of exceptionality. Perhaps it is subjective, but to me it is very real: many of these residents are in the process of triumphing over enormous handicaps in the final periods of their lives. These handicaps are mental, physical, emotional, and societal, and the fact that these old people even want to fight back makes them very special indeed.

Part of my work as an adult education teacher in the Mountain View-Los Altos (CA) High School District involves the teaching of poetry and other literature classes in residential care and skilllled nursing facilities. In the latter, our poetry class is therapeutic in nature, satisfying a real need for these very ill people to express their frustrations, hopes, fears, and joys. All of the class members are in various stages of handicap and sickness (Parkinsonism, multiple sclerosis, stroke, diabetes and amputation), and their ages range from sixty-five to ninety.

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Poetry as therapy is hardly a new idea, but there is always something new to be learned. Kenneth Koch says in his book, I Never Told Anybody, which is about teaching poetry writing in nursing homes:

> "I saw, even in their very difficult circumstances, the possibilities for poetry." (Koch, p.4)

I might amend that statement to read: because of their very difficult circumstances, the necessity for poetry. A man in my class, an amputee subject to periods of extreme depression, said to me, "I'd go crazy if I couldn't get all of this out of me and into poetry."

My nursing home students are open to almost any kind of poetry, the difficult as well as the old favorites. The writers we return to again and again are Frost, Yeats, and the anonymous writers of Native American tribes. During a reading session it is not unusual to hear sighs of pleasure, murmurs of agreement - or disagreement- and outright laughter. Faces light up, memories come alive, and we are ready to try our own hands at writing poetry. The stage has been set by these readings, usually on a subject the class has picked, and the next step is the line-by-line contribution of class members. The students are almost uniformly willing to contribute their own efforts toward the making of a poem: there is much accumulated wisdom and suffering to share. The fact, too, that these people are continuing to learn toward the end of their lives is a special joy to them. They had been told by society that they were finished, and they have found that that is not so.

We have two basic methods of creating our poetry, and both rely on the mood setting provided by selected readings. In the first method, I ask each class member what he or she would like to say on the subject. For example, if the poetry selections have been about patriotism, each will contribute a memory, a belief, a philosophy, or an anecdote. Fourth of July, World War I, pro or anti-Vietnam statements, nuclear war...all are acceptable. Each thought forms a line of the poem, and somehow, when we have finished, the thoughts become a whole, and we have a finished poem. It is not unusual for the students to break into applause at what they have accomplished. I may write down their thoughts for them, as many are unable to do so, but the poem is their very own creation.

The second method involves a brainstorming technique. Again, we will have set the stage with our readings, but this time I willl ask the students to throw out as many words as they can on the subject. If we are writing a poem about the fall, I will hear, "Crisp ... crunch ... crackle ... pumpkin ... smoke... apples ... rain ... sweaters." This method is also the one that results most often in a rhyming poem ... "Geese calling, leaves falling..." Either way, we have been part of a creative, therapeutic experience; the class members have contributed thoughts and feelings close to their hearts, and a healing has taken place.

The students are not the only ones who learn. Families and nursing home staff members are often amazed to find that the "patient's" creative process has not stopped, that there is still a spark waiting to be kindled. And it is almost impossible to

describe how much a teacher learns under these circumstances. One day a lady was wheeled into my class, so severely stroke damaged that her mouth was slack and she could barely raise her head. I thought, "Why on earth did they bring this poor woman in here?" I soon found out. As the class began composing a poem involving contrasts and comparisons between spring and fall, she raised her head and said with great difficulty,

"Every day in spring is like a day
the Bomb has not exploded...
In the fall, the bombs have all
Been inventoried and loaded."

I think it is safe to say that I have learned never to write anyone off.

My students are adventurous, too. After hearing some of the poetry of Charles Doss, the prison poet, they decided to write about their own particular "prisons" of poor health, loss, and isolation, and to send the result to Mr. Doss in prison. Within just a few days, he answered and told the class how much their poem had meant to him. He singled out a line here and there to comment on, just as though he were reviewing a new poem in "The New Yorker". My students were stunned. Their creation had brought them notice. They had shared, and they had done something for someone else.

Therein, perhaps, lies the most compelling reason for teaching poetry writing in nursing homes. So often in these facilities, or in many situations involving the aged, everything is done for them. Loss of the ability to do for oneself or to do something for others is the most debilitating handicap of old age. Through their own creative processes these students are

overcoming that handicap, and showing just how exceptional they really are.

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METHODOLOGY I

1. Class picks and discusses subject for poetry session (Christmas, family, death, loneliness, etc.)
2. Teacher or class member who is able reads poetry selections applicable to subject
3. Group shares and contributes their own thoughts and feelings to the creation of a group poem
4. Teacher writes down each line as it is given
5. Teacher or able class member reads the assembled group poem
6. "We did it!"

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METHODOLOGY II

1. Class picks and discusses poetry subject

2. Teacher or able class member reads poetry selections applicable to subject

3. Teacher calls for class members to toss out words and phrases about the subject as fast as possible, rhyming whenever they can

4. Teacher records and reads back the results

5. Poem! (This really does work!)